



CHAPTER 4:

Why is it so important to enhance learning through a better job performance and reflection? And, how could we develop better organization learning?

We all agree about how important learning is, but when we refer to organizational learning the concept is not very well understood, or if it is, people are skeptical about it. We learn through our life experience and working. As individuals, maybe we go to Hotel Schools, professional programs or specific seminars in which we truly learn. We learn about techniques, technological advances, methods and tools, management facts, and maybe, fashionable business concepts. This is certainly a part of learning, but mostly individualized. It is a kind of know-what learning: if we lack this experience, then we hire the proper person or we get the proper training program to make up for our ignorance. This approach it should be enough in certain business, in a stable situation of solid profitability, and certainly still a working solution in many different contexts, but it is not longer a solution in a hyper-competitive business situation. In such situation, as we have said, doing the right things is no longer a solution. In that context, in-work learning becomes a key point to improve response in a more uncertain business world. This type of learning is more focused on know-how learning. It means that, we all –not only top management- learn from our jobs, constantly, in order to better respond to external challenges. In-work learning though is not only an individual process, but a social

interaction too. And it implies many changes in current hospitality mind-sets.

Organizational learning it must be established, as a core value -if the purpose is to make innovation happening through our operations. It should be a declared objective, first of all from Top Management. As Chris Argyris –a Harvard Business professor- pointed out in his article Learning smart people how to learn (1991)- To be able to learn, is not that easy when we become specialist in what we are doing. The term itself means that, as “Masters” we do not have much room left to improve, let alone to accept our failures or to question our used theories. He says: “Solving problems is important to learning, but if learning is to persist in our mind-sets, employees and managers won’t advance past a certain point. They must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behavior, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization’s problems, and then change how they act. In particular, they must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right.” I would add up that, in order to learn how to learn, we should be capable to eliminate many professional biases that we all have developed in our careers.

Individual learning sure is very important, but up to a certain point it is irrelevant if is not shared with the group and constantly enhanced. It is even more important, if any hospitality team does apply knowledge synergies as a whole, instead of as individuals or department silos. Most companies are full of “islands of Knowledge”. We, as individuals may learn either way, when working –other people learn less-, or in-groups. The fact is that in hospitality organizations or individual properties, there is not much organizational learning



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happening. Executives are not very concern about this issue, since organizational learning implies a dramatic change in the traditional views. Hospitality management and organization structures are settled basically to command and control, and service workers are there just to provide good service obeying orders. That is all, and learning it may be reserved to seldom people.

Through a PDCA (plan-do-act and check) process, learning happens continually if, not only managers, but also front-line employees are encouraged to analyzed their jobs. Learning in jobs happens constantly when service workers are also responsible to contribute to job improvement. Learning happens all of the times when every worker is analyzing how a process could be improved, or when trying to solve a problem getting to its roots. Maybe problems appeared to the surface when analyzing a guest feedback or just by recognizing a human mistake.

The process of learning is first individually, that is, the employee reflection about how he could contribute to improve a working process, maybe by setting new procedure towards better cost optimization, or with the purpose to provide more value to guests. In any case individually learning must be put it also to the service of the group. Indeed, organizational learning happens in-group, as a group of workers together with managers thinking in-group about a problem and its possible best solution, debating-planning: and thus developing a countermeasure – doing. Then, by putting the plan into action – acting, and monitoring, in order to make further adjustments if necessary-checking.

The style of management must also be appropriate to enhance organizational

learning; a particular type of leadership more confident in her or himself, but at the same time humble enough to being able to get rid of a harmful ego. So there is not space for authoritarian leaders, nor for employees not being able to accept higher levels of responsibility, and thus being committed with the company goals and objectives.

It is important to underscore that learn also from our mistakes. There is not innovation progress happening without falling. Period. As human beings we are fallible, indeed this fact should be taken into consideration when managing. The tayloristic view, in which hotel operations standards will be designed on top (planners) and expect to be executed with a proper training by service workers together with managers limits individual and organizational learning. I agreed that there must be always a base (standard) to start working, since there is not possible improvement if we do not have a standard thought up at the beginning or to a certain moment. However, the key point starts when improvement and thinking is also a bottom-up process.

To become a learning organization means becoming a more adaptive organization to all sorts of problems, customer changes, and market evolutions or just to respond to competition.

